

Brixworth – An 18th Century Parish Register Analysis

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Apart from bishops' transcripts, few parish register copies are known to have been made before the nineteenth century. The *National Index of Parish Registers* records only one – a copy of Leeds parish register which was held by a Mr. Lucas in 1791. [1] An earlier example than this is a volume relating to Brixworth, Northamptonshire, and is of considerably more than parochial interest.

Brixworth, a village some six miles north of the centre of Northampton on the road to Market Harborough, is probably best known for its imposing Saxon church. F.M. Eden, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, described the parish as containing some 800 inhabitants, who were graziers, agricultural labourers and spinners. [2] No doubt additional employment was found in the six alehouses and at stables serving the needs of travellers on the turnpike road. Eden noted that, excepting a few Methodists, all the villagers were members of the Church of England.

The Northamptonshire Record Office at Delapre Abbey, Northampton, holds an analysis of the Brixworth parish registers which appears to have been initiated in 1764. The book (N.R.O. call number ML 380) has been rebound in recent years and does not state who compiled it. However, it is clearly the work of the Rev. James Jackson, who was vicar of the parish for the 35 years prior to his death in 1770. The entries are in his handwriting up to that date and were clearly recorded by someone with a knowledge of the inhabitants which was far more extensive than the bare information in the register itself. Later references are in a different hand and continue until 1776.

The main body of the book (pages 1 to 111) arranges entries by surname groups, headed with a list of their spelling variations. Within these groups, individuals are shown generally in the order in which they are first mentioned in the original register. Running down past each name are columns used for recording details including the following: (a) description (e.g., parentage and occupation), (b) date of baptism, (c) name of spouse and date of marriage, (d) date of burial.

The surname groups do not appear in alphabetical order and are sometimes split between blocks on widely separated pages. Some groups have been continued in an 'overflow' section on pages 122 to 128. However, these difficulties can be overcome by referring to a strict alphabetical index of surnames in the book which appears on pages 137 to 139.

Following the surname groups are lists of certain baptisms, marriages and burials, apparently of individuals not positively linked with any of the significant family groups. Page 116 includes two lists relating to the burials of those whose names were either completely or partly unknown and 14 persons who died of the plague in 1603 and 1604. Page 119 gives a statistical analysis of the events recorded in the 219 years from the beginning of the parish register in 1546. These total 3,523 baptisms, 699 marriages and 2,693 burials. In contrast, pages 120 and 121 are devoted to a table of ecclesiastical fees.

Like most parish register copies, Jackson's book does not explain the editorial principles adopted. Internal evidence suggests the following pattern. In addition to the names and dates appearing in the parish register itself, Jackson included information derived from his own personal knowledge and that of his flock. For instance, William and Martha

Martin – whose first known child was baptised at Brixworth in 1665 – had not been married there. Jackson records Martha's maiden name as Bland but does not provide the date or place of the couple's marriage. Presumably this was the extent of the information which Jackson had been able to glean from the surviving members of her family about Martha's origins – Martha herself had been buried as early as 1675/6. Inter-generational links are shown for the period with which Jackson and his informants were familiar but for earlier periods he refrained from drawing even quite plausible inferences about relationships which were not explicitly stated in the register. It is likely, for instance, that George Holman whose daughter was baptised at Brixworth in 1646 was the George Holman who had been baptised there in 1620/1, but this interpretation is not suggested by Jackson.

Details added to those found in the register may include the place of baptism of newcomers, the place of marriage of those who married 'away' or before arriving at Brixworth, the names of the partners of those who married outside the parish, the residence in 1764 of emigrants, their eventual burial places, and family relationships which would otherwise have been unclear. Although most migration was within 10 miles, some destinations are very far afield and unlikely to be proved by any other source, e.g. Joseph Howcutt (baptised in 1731) died in Germany and William Walpole (baptised 1708/9) ended his days at Bedlam (i.e., the Bethlehem Hospital lunatic asylum, London) in 1755.

Other unusual items include a reference to Dorothy, second wife of Samuel Lawndon (or Laundon) who went away (eloped) with Jack Whatley and died in the Fens; a list of several occupations for Richard Green (buried 1766), ranging from '1st an Attorney, 2d an Exciseman...' to 'last of all an idle fellow', while the second marriage of Thomas Holman (baptised 1700/1) was to a 'tawny woman' who was buried at the nearby village of Holcot.

The primary use of Jackson's work is for reconstituting and investigating the genealogy of families known to have lived in the Brixworth area. Because a large proportion of the origins and destinations of migrants are included, the book has further potential for studying the patterns and velocity of population movement in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It would be interesting to hear of any similar works also surviving from the period before 1800.

References

- [1] D.J Steel. *National Index of Parish Registers*, Vol. 1, p. 183. Society of Genealogists (London 1968).
- [2] F. M. Eden. *The State of the Poor*. Vol. II. p. 528 (1797).